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FM REO HILLAH

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0600

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RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0651

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TAGS: PGOV KISL KDEM I2

SUBJECT: NAJAF: SADR MEETS WITH SISTANI'S SON, SUPPORTS JA'AFARI FOR NOW

REF: A) HILLAH 57 B) HILLAH 59

CLASSIFIED BY: Alfred Fonteneau, Regional Coordinator, REO Hillah, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. On the evening of April 13, Mohammad Ridha Sistani, son of Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, visited Moqtada Al-Sadr at his residence in the Al-Hannah district of Najaf to discuss the ongoing government formation process. According to sources from within Sadr's and Sistani's offices, Sadr expressed his continued support for Prime Minister-designate Ja'afari. However, Sadr would agree to a Ja'afari replacement if and only if such a decision was made without U.S. and Coalition pressure. Both Sistani and Sadr agreed that a government must be formed soon to avoid giving insurgents further incentive to attack sites in Najaf as was the case during the April bombing in the vicinity of the Imam Ali Shrine. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (C) Moqtada Al-Sadr met with Mohammed Ridha Sistani for approximately two hours on the evening of April 13 at Sadr's residence in Najaf. Representatives from both Sadr and Sistani's offices, in conversations with State Embedded Team-Najaf local staff confirmed the meeting and said the primary focus was on the ongoing government formation negotiations. NOTE. Local media in Najaf reported the meeting, with very little detail, on April ¶15. END NOTE.

¶13. (C) Sadr reaffirmed his support for United Iraqi Alliance Prime Minister-designate Ibrahim Al-Ja'afari. However, Sadr said he would support a decision by the UIA to replace Ja'afari with another candidate. This decision must be solely an Iraqi and UIA led process, however, and not a result of U.S. pressure or interference in the internal affairs of the Iraqi people. Sadr assured Sistani that he would work to ensure that his followers peacefully accepted a decision to present a candidate other than Ja'afari for PM. In any case, remaining questions should be resolved as quickly as possible to reduce the chances of violence, particularly in Najaf.

¶14. (C) Sistani and Sadr also agreed on the need for Sunni leadership to condemn extremism. To this end, Sadr reportedly offered to arrange a meeting between Ayatollah Sistani and Sunni scholars. Sadr and Sistani demanded in particular that alleged Sunni expulsions of Shi'a families must cease, and internally displaced persons must be allowed to return to their homes. Mohammed Sistani agreed in principle with the idea, but did not say anything further.

¶15. (C) Sistani informed Sadr that his father, Ayatollah Sistani, had sent a letter to Egyptian president Hosni Mubarek, condemning his comments regarding the loyalty of Iraqi Shi'a and asking for a formal apology to the Iraqi people. Sadr agreed, and expressed his outrage and astonishment at the Egyptian

president's remarks.

**¶6. (C) COMMENT:** The content of the meeting between Sadr and the son of Ayatollah Sistani, is another indicator of the growing impatience with the failure of the UIA to resolve the Ja'afari question. In private, Sadr's support for Ja'afari appears to be slightly softer than he has indicated in his public statements (Ref. A). This impatience notwithstanding, there is no indication at this point that Ayatollah Sistani himself, unlike other Marja'aya clerics (Ref. B), will enter the fray. END COMMENT

FONTENEAU